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23 May 2012

Growth in the Garden: A Series of Vignettes

Permaculture Growing

At first glance, the permaculture garden in the Eastside neighborhood just looks like a large abandoned property overgrown with weeds. I think about the foreclosures and condemnation of houses in this neighborhood. An overgrown and abandoned lot is not shocking. In fact, this space was once occupied by foreclosed, condemned, and abandoned homes. Yet, only a few steps past the lot's fenceless boundaries, past the brown and gray, past the piles of found cement, rocks, and compost, green lives here. "Gardens always seem to play against whatever constitutes ordinary landscape in their time," Michael Pollan writes (Pollan 239). This must be a garden then, because this landscape is not ordinary. Behind the piles of debris, rows of grapes smile at the sky. According to permaculture rules, they must grow away from cabbage plants, for it would spoil their sweet soil. Clusters of baby fruit and nut trees are surrounded by organic compost. It richens their beds. The focal point of this wide space, front and center, is a sable, black circle, wriggling with worms and growing plants: a community garden plot. Tiny green sprouts fill the plot in angled lines: sunflowers in back, tomatoes and peppers next, basil, spinach, kale, and arugula. The smallest sprouts, peas, grow closest to the street. The plants form a sign of peace. A peas garden, a peace garden. This peace is also a piece of evidence that life does exist in this seemingly abandoned place. As cars drive past, broken, loud, cracked, the peas grow plump and lush and full. The garden will be larger someday. Week after week, I have watched this plot and the plants inside it grow.

Peas

Peas are my thing. *Pisum sativum*. Green balls of firm vegetable meat. Rows of peas in a pod. I like groupings. The crowd, huddle, flock, bunch of peas. They never have to be alone. In pods, peas will always have friends. If peas were people, I would be their people. Their person. I fought to grow peas in our garden plot. Apparently, not everyone loves peas as much as I do. But why not? Technically both fruit and vegetable, peas are so convenient. Fulfill two food

group requirements with one food. And they pop, pop, pop into your mouth like healthy potato chips. My gardening partners couldn't find these redeeming qualities and they put up a wee pea fight. But in the end, the peas are in the front triangle of our peace garden. Let's be honest, they make the name. And I am so proud of my baby peas. Their sprouts are tiny, but they're growing. They won their seat in our garden and their tiny leaves stand up like flags. These peas require "intimate and direct involvement," like any good garden plant does (Francis 6). I feel close to my peas. I'm growing with them. Like Mary when she found sprouts in *The Secret Garden*, I want to lean down and kiss my peas, but not like you'd kiss a person. My small sprouts parallel my growing love for this garden, this plot, this space. They are my almost permanent claim over this triangle of dirt. I care about my plants because when I go home, these peas will stay.

Daughter Snake

A four-inch-long plastic snake lives among the peas. He is the Grandfather Snake. He watches over the garden. His soft, imaginary whispers encourage the small sprouts to flourish, thrive, shoot. Hiss, hiss, hiss. We call the snake our Grandfather, like Indigo and Sister Salt. But is this snake the old grandfather or his daughter? Has the "Old Snake's beautiful daughter moved back home?" (Silko 477). I think this makes more sense. In Indigo's story, strangers arrived and slaughtered the big old rattlesnake. Tomme says the strangers, the poverty, the greed slaughtered beautiful, healthy Kalamazoo and its guardian too. But not to worry. This garden was not "hacked to death with the snake" (Silko 476). There is a Trybal Revival here now and the daughter is home. We found her by the road, abandoned. She is safe now, and so are our peas. Blue and white. Chipped. No mouth, no eyes, but the Daughter Snake protects our garden. I imagine her winding through the composted soil in our plot, "more subtle than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made" (Genesis 3:1). In the garden, Daughter Snake guides me. When I see her plastic body, caked in thick dirt, my eyes are opened to the good things that live here. The garden, the plants, the food are good. Our work is good. I can't find any evil. Daughter Snake invites us into her garden. She opens our eyes to the growth inside. She protects, nurtures, cultivates our knowledge. Each day in the garden, we touch the freshly grown peas and stroke our new guardian, Daughter Snake. As the peas swell in the earth, the

displaced soil continues to coat the snake and I. We are comfortable with our new layers of earth. The garden is our home now. We will protect it together.

Permaculture Learning

Novella Carpenter writes in *Farm City* that a book once promised her that she could create, “an easy-to-maintain, no-work food forest” if she just followed the instructions it gave her (Carpenter 19). Novella had a permaculture vision: ease, forest, food. Dale and Tomme have permaculture visions too. They see clusters of deciduous nut trees, an edible forest of fruit trees, berry bushes, fertile garden beds. In the middle: maybe a pergola, definitely a gathering space. Dale and Tomme will have a food forest too someday, but their forest won’t be “easy-to-maintain.” They don’t hope for that. Dale and Tomme have hopes that they will cover the pergola in ivy and surround it with soft shrubs and laughter. The people in this space will sustain each other like the permaculture plants, but will that be as easy? I don’t know. Plant vegetables, tend greenery, add mulch, build fences. But will the people come? I don’t know. On the map, the community garden plots have arms that reach towards each other. Their mulched keyhole faces call “hello, neighbor!” Bright green and light brown. Well rounded. But in the real world, there is just one plot in this garden. It reaches out to no one. The plants grow inside. They communicate together. Tomato and basil make soup. Herbs blend in healing aromas. Spinach and peppers form salad. This comes with ease. A “no-work food forest.” But does this community garden work if the permaculture relationships only exist between plants?

Magic

I’m working inside the garden at Trybal Revival. My thoughts circle around the growth that takes place inside the garden’s borders. The growth must be something similar to “Magic” in *The Secret Garden*. Burnett’s “Magic” grows, heals, and shapes gardening children. The garden and its powers are hushed, hushed secrets. Magic grows children and plants together. Things live, flourish, thrive inside the secret garden’s walls, and it’s magic. The Magic is everything. “The sun is shining -- the sun is shining. That is the Magic. The flowers are growing -- the roots are stirring. That is the Magic. Being alive is the Magic -- being strong is the Magic.

The Magic is in me -- the Magic is in me. It is in me -- it is in me. It's in every one of us," the children say (Burnett 234). Magic is the growth that changes people, changes animals, changes plants inside the walls of their garden. Magic transforms. It blooms cascading roses in the secret garden, and it blooms thick vegetables in this one. Magic is not a fairytale at Trybal Revival. It is as true as the ripe yellow peppers, blooming red tomatoes, and purple basil making Magic, growing around me. The sun shines, warmer and warmer each day, over our circular plot. Magic. Our seeds transform into plants before us. Magic. My legs grow sore and my cheeks pink as I bike back and forth to garden. Magic. The Magic is in me. It grows in me. It grows this plot. It grows this community.

Grow to Belong

I was not supposed to garden here. I was supposed to be at Peace House, but I moved to this lonely garden with an intriguing name. Trybal Revival. It just sounded right. It is right. My gardening interest, my learning passion mingles with Dale and Tomme's immense love for living things. They are my mentors, and I knew they would be. In Kate's black car on the first day, we were surprised. A yellow house with green trim. The pristine community garden and matching house perched on a hill. A snapshot of urban farming in a somber, colorless neighborhood. A tall man in a large-brimmed straw hat and thick, black suspenders steps outside. His silver braid swings with his steps under his hat. He looks like Willie Nelson. Willie Nelson gardening. Hidden behind him, a small woman in ripped jeans. She holds her clipboard close. We keep watching from the car. I want these people to be my people. I want to fit into their urban farm paradise. But am I green enough? Chill enough? Am I brave enough to work in this neighborhood where dogs bark louder and children cry harder? We hop out of the car. We talk in a circle of wooden chairs. Dale and her clipboard. I'm organized too. Tomme says sometimes people steal. Plants ripped from the ground and transplanted into someone else's yard. "It's a shame," he said. "But at least they're interested in gardening." Somehow, the stealing story set my fears aside. I'm optimistic too. I have faith too. As the weeks at Trybal Revival pass, I grow calmer. Horticultural therapy. These people don't need to be my people, but they are.

The First Sign of Growth

This is my garden. Our garden. Our plot. We built the bed. We uprooted the foreign grass and we made the dirt into soil with compost. I stacked old stones, bricks, rocks for the retaining wall in front. No rainwater will escape now. We made the map. We planted some of the vegetables and herbs by seed and some with starts. We used what Tomme had taught us about permaculture theory. And now the plants have started to grow. One day, the sprouts were just there, alive. There was no in between. One day, the seeds became seedlings. Dale smiled when she told us our plot was growing. She knew we'd be excited. She was right. When I first spotted green sprouts inside our circular plot, I felt delight spread through my body. My fingers that had pressed the seeds into the dirt. My knees that I had rested on. My arms and legs that had been streaked with wet black and brown. I felt a kick, buzz, charge that could only have been sparked by the same Magic as Burnett describes in *The Secret Garden*. The sprouts appeared so suddenly. They were so alive. I was startled. "Magic is always pushing and drawing and making things out of nothing," Colin would have told me. "So it must be all around us. In this garden – in all the places." (Burnett 231). That's a startling thing to realize. But germination, of course. That's the explanation. The fundamental conditions were present in this plot. But I prefer Magic. In our garden, there is no science. There is only the Magic that makes things grow. That makes our plants grow. That makes us grow.

Silo Singing

Jack Coombs Trailway Park. Silo: a pit for holding grain. Not a pit for singing. This isn't a garden. There aren't any *real* plants. Just bricks. Just cement. Just a meadow. Singers arrive and Kate and I press our bodies up against the cool walls of the silo. I've never been in a silo before. I didn't know people could go inside. It's dark and cold. Tomme said he saw this abandoned building and thought it would be perfect for singing. The acoustics. Beautiful. He fixed the silo. He cleaned it, created a window, painted the door. He brought the silo back to life like we brought our permaculture plot to life. He cultivated it. And now, voices glide, swing, sail into the dome roof. In a circle, the singers close their eyes and sway. From the outer walls, Kate and I sway too. To Tomme, spirituality grows inside this silo. To him, it is a garden. "Singing circles of sound without words brings out our intuitive nature and makes vocalizing amazingly

accessible,” they say on the website. Singing circles of sound without words. The circles of sound interact in the circular silo. They spin together and reflect the shape of our circular plot. A circular garden. A sound garden. Inside the silo.

The Bees

The bees came in boxes. Two wire boxes. I think they must have been angry inside those cages. We hummed, droned, with excitement thinking about all of the bees before they came. All the honey! Dale said we could help her inspect their hives. Excitement buzz. And then we saw them. “Put your baseball cap on backwards to protect your neck,” Dale says. Why does my neck need protection? Shouldn’t this net keep me safe? “These gloves aren’t meant for beekeeping, but they should be fine,” she says. You don’t know that. These gloves will not protect me from a sting. Green, thin, disposable. I tuck my feet inside this white suit. Secure my baseball cap. Tomme checks the net. Gloves on. Zipped up. Maybe I should just watch? Forty thousand bees. Dale skips her gloves. She likes to feel the bees. We approach the humming hives. My face crinkles, my hands shake. Forty thousand bees. And then, suddenly, tranquility. I think the bee smoke must calm humans too. As the bees float past, some landing on our hands, our veils, our arms, our chests, I feel comfortable. My serenity only grows as I lift a panel covered in yellow and black wings. I see their honeycombs. They’re so furry. Forty thousand bees. After this, I don’t swat at bees anymore. The comfort smoke stayed in my lungs and I know they don’t want to hurt me. But if I’m ever again surrounded by forty thousand honeybees, I’ll wear another protective suit.

Kittens

Purr, squeal, whimper. No meows. Not yet. These kittens are too young, hidden under a rock in the brush. Their fur is tangled together like the ivy above them. Black, black, black, orange. Black, orange, black, black. How many are there? Squealing, crying for their feral mother who doesn’t come. Four. They snuggle, cuddle, cry some more. “Can’t we take them home?” we beg together. “They’re calling out to me, *barn cats!*” Dale shouts. Tomme isn’t convinced. These kittens are feral too, he reminds us. Wild, untrained, savage. We should let

nature take its course, he says. The kittens are clustered in another circle. Another garden. By picking them up, taking them home, feeding them milk from our refrigerators, would we be cultivating these kittens? Probably. “The garden has always been viewed philosophically as the balancing point between human control on one hand and wild nature on the other,” Mark Francis writes (Francis 2). These balls of fur, mewling and helpless, give me an illustration of Francis’ idea for the first time. I want to exercise human control on these animals. I want to help them, hold them, grow them. But they are wild, natural. If I want to be a real natural gardener, do I need to let them be feral, like Tomme says? Now I’m confused. The garden is “nature-under-control,” Francis argues, “an idealization of what society believed that nature should be and should look like” (Francis 2). My image of the kittens, these fluffy, harmless, adorable creatures, is idealized. In my desire for them to be pets, “barn cats,” I’m changing nature to be what I think it should be: fluffy, harmless, adorable, and lovely all the time. So what do we do? We decide to let them spend the night in wild nature. Tomorrow, if they are still huddled under a rock, behind ivy, outside of our garden, we will take them into our idealized, cultivated world and they will become humane society kittens. I don’t know what I hope for. These kittens will never be barn cats.

The Danes

Mickel has a full beard. His round glasses and bright shirts make him look like a friendly cartoon character. Malte has two-inch long hair, but wears a tuft in a ponytail. The pants he wears have a large patch. These twenty two year olds are WWOOFing across the United States this summer. They give their labor on organic farms, they get beds to sleep in and food to eat. A fair trade. It’s funny. I’ve never thought of Trybal Revival as an organic farm, but Dale and Tomme do. And apparently so do Mickel and Malte. It makes sense. We grow organic food on a piece of land. Organic farm. I was surprised when I met Mickel and Malte. People actually come to the United States and hitchhike to find organic farms? We make a pact: Kate, Kelsey, Courtney, Indigo, and Morgan will WWOOF someday. We will be these people. Dale and Tomme think we should see the Danes as cultural education. One day, instead of working, Dale tells us to “take our shoes off and swap thoughts.” We do. We form a circle in the permaculture garden and pull grass from the ground as we talk. Did you know that there aren’t race divisions in Denmark? Malte said so. He doesn’t know if gay marriage is legal there or not. “Americans are suspicious of everyone,” he says. Today, inside this garden, culture grows, conversation grows,

understanding grows. Before I wondered, “does this community garden work if the permaculture relationships only exist between plants?” Well, now there are human relationships inside this garden. There is a community. I’ve seen it. I am it. Permaculture is working. Our American perspectives mingle with the perspectives of our new Danish friends. Permaculture.

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